Coins

by Tyler Koch

The boy grabbed his BB gun and went outside, before the sun set for the evening. He set up empty Coke cans on stumps in his back yard. Then, shouldering his gun, he marched twenty paces from the cans and turned around.

"Draw!" he shouted.

Ting!

The first BB knocked the can off the stump. The second shot missed. As did the third. The boy bit his lower lip in concentration and fired again.

Ting!

Two down.

A strong breeze blew and caused the can to shiver, the aluminum cylinder vibrating violently on the wooden stump. The boy took a breath and waited.

Ting!

One. Two. Three. All down.

The boy set his gun in the grass and ran toward his fallen compatriots. All three cans had multiple holes, the metal twisted and dented in odd places. He set the cans on the stumps and ran back to his gun.

"Draw!" he shouted.

Ting! Ting! Ting!

Three for three.

The boy's eyes grew wide with excitement and he fired a fourth shot just because he could. The extra BB entered the wooden stump and stayed there.

"Take that!"

He ran toward the stumps and raised his fists in triumph. He searched for the cans and found them. They looked worse than before. The boy straightened the aluminum the best he could and set them back on the stumps. He grabbed his gun and pushed the stock into his shoulder.

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Ting!

One for one.

Ting!

Two for two.

The next shot missed and the boy's excitement vanished.

“Shoot,” he said, stamping his foot on the ground. The game suddenly didn't seem quite as fun anymore. He placed his gun in the grass and collected the cans and placed them in a burlap bag he used to keep his cans when he wasn't shooting. The burlap bag was placed on a hook just to the right of the sliding glass door.

“You ever try shooting anything other than cans?”

The boy turned and saw a tall man standing in the back yard. He looked familiar but the boy couldn't remember where. He seemed nice though, not like the bad men his parents talked about.

“No,” said the boy. He kept a firm hold on his gun.

The man nodded as if to say, *that's alright*.

“You have a good shot.”

The boy could think of nothing to say so he remained silent.

“I saw you shooting. I was standing just there.” The man pointed to a nondescript spot near the sidewalk. “You're good.”

“Thanks,” replied the boy.

“You ever try shooting anything else?”

The boy shook his head. The man remained where he was and put his hands in his pockets. The breeze colored the cool night air. The sun began to set.

“You should. Sometime. If your parents are alright with that, of course. Don't want to do anything to upset them.” The man smiled good-naturedly. “Always listen to your parents.”

The boy nodded. His parents were inside cooking dinner. It would be ready soon.

“You ever try shooting the stars?”

The boy cocked his head. He'd never thought of such a thing before.

“No,” he said, surprised by his own voice.

The man nodded reassuringly.

“It's alright. I didn't either for quite some time. And even when I did, I never had the aim you did. Took me a year to learn.”

The boy glanced inside his house and saw his mother carrying a pot to the dining room table. She laughed at something the boy couldn't hear.

“But the stars,” continued the man, bringing the boy back. “You need good aim.” The man mimed shooting a gun at the sky. “You could do it. Shoot a star.”

The boy furrowed his brow and held his gun tighter.

“You just aim and shoot. That easy really. For someone like you. Just aim and shoot.”

It sounded suspicious to the boy. Stars were so far away.

“I bet you're thinking that it's impossible. That the stars are too far away.”

The boy couldn't conceal his surprise.

“But they're not. You ever think about what holds the stars in place?”

The boy shook his head.

“Strings,” said the man knowledgeably. He gestured with his hands. “Long invisible strings. You can't see them with your eyes, but trust me on this. I've looked with a special telescope and sure enough, the strings are there. Millions of them, all holding the stars. They'd fall without them. The stars, that is. They'd fall without the strings to keep them up there.”

“What holds the strings?” blurted the boy.

The man grinned and tipped an imaginary cap. “There's a smart lad. His name is the Star Catcher.”

“The Star Catcher?” The boy's voice rose an octave with the question.

“Indeed,” nodded the man. “The Star Catcher. He holds all the strings in his hands and lives in the clouds. I've met him once.

Nice fellow really. Just busy. Can you imagine holding that many strings?”

The boy couldn't.

“He has very large hands, bigger than yours and mine put together.” The man put his hand up for reference.

“That's big,” said the boy.

“Very,” agreed the man. “And that's why he's alright if you shoot a star. It would make his job easier. Less strings to hold.”

That made sense to the boy.

“Why is he called the Star Catcher if he holds strings?”

The man raised his eyebrows in surprise. “I've never thought of that.” He snapped his fingers. An idea. “I'll have to ask next time I see him. That's a good question!”

He felt self-conscious at the man's praise.

“Have you ever thought what stars are made of?”

“No,” he said.

The man nodded seriously. “I hadn't either. Not until I met the Star Catcher. He told me all the stars in the universe are actually coins. Coins! Big coins. Small coins. Different colors. All depends.”

“Coins?” exclaimed the boy. He quickly glanced inside and saw his mother continuing to set the table, unperturbed by his outburst.

“I know!” followed the man, eyes wide. “Coins! Who would have ever thought?” He chuckled to himself. “But it's true. I didn't believe it myself until I shot a star. Took me a while I can tell you. But I did it and there it fell! A coin. I bit it just to make sure. Tasted like stardust. That's how I knew it was real.”

The boy wondered what stardust tasted like and almost asked. He wanted to know.

“Dinner!” he heard instead. His mother's voice.

“You should go,” said the man in response. “I bet you're hungry.”

The boy nodded. He made to open the glass door.

“Don't forget about the stars,” said the man.

“I won't,” said the boy.

All through dinner the boy couldn't stop thinking about the conversation. He wanted to know the man's truth for himself, that stars were actually coins held on strings. He finished his meal quickly and ran upstairs and loaded his BB gun with as many BB's as it would hold. Then he waited until his mother and father came into his bedroom and kissed him goodnight. Waited until the lights in the house turned off and the air spoke of silence.

The boy grabbed his BB gun and crept from his room, down the stairs and toward the sliding glass door. The moon shone opaque through the window. Quietly the boy stepped outside into the grass. The blades wiggled between his toes and soft dirt stained his heels. But he had only eyes for the stars. The coins held by strings in the sky.

Ping!

The boy waited but nothing happened. He must have missed.

Ping!

Ping!

Ping!

Ping!

Nothing. The boy trusted what the man said, that the coins weren't as far away as they seemed. He turned his eyes and found one that looked almost close enough to touch. He raised and fired.

Ping!

He bit his lower lip in concentration.

Ting!

The boy's heart leapt in his chest. He'd done it! Several seconds passed. The boy looked back to the sky and saw the coin had moved several inches to the right. He'd have to shoot it again.

Ting!

Ting!

The coin drifted across the sky with each shot. The boy hoped the strings weren't getting caught on one another. He worried about the Star Catcher.

Ting!

The boy brought the gun's barrel to the sky for another shot but couldn't find the coin he'd been aiming for. It had vanished. He frowned and took a step forward. His toes felt something hard and cold. He threw away his gun and bent down. His fingers wrapped around a small object. A coin! The boy smiled to himself. He stuck out his tongue.

It tasted of stardust.